

E1-6748

March 5, 2008

Mr. David Navecky  
STB Finance Docket No. 35095  
Surface Transportation Board  
395 E Street SW  
Washington, D. C. 20423

Re: Proposed Alaska Railroad Corridor (proposal corridor 3) through Willow, Alaska

Dear Mr. Nottingham,

My name is Bob Chlupach.

I live in Willow, Alaska.

Often times the "little guy" gets drowned out in big projects by political maneuvering. I do hope your Board takes the time to read my letter of concerns. Please bear with me, it is a long letter, but one I hope you will find informative.

When I was younger, my wife and I, settled near Mirror Lake, just outside of Anchorage approximately 20 miles, well before the existing 4-lane was constructed. I was employed first in Anchorage and then Palmer as a Fishery Biologist for the State of Alaska. We had sled dogs and before sled dog people are lumped into a category and this letter filed, continue to bear with me, as the contents to follow are "not" just about sled dogs but "family" and the future of such. Ultimately, we chose a move to Willow. By the time the 4-lane was completed we had and harbor no angst against the 4-lane while it did force us to evaluate where we could best raise our daughter and still experience the quality of life we sought for the whole family, that being a more rural lifestyle allowing us to continue as professional people while having sled dogs.

Our first location in Willow was between Mile 65 and 66 along the Parks Highway. There, we were able to continue work as professional employees, our daughter got a quality public school education later becoming a Dietetics Program Manager at the Alaska Native Hospital in Anchorage and we were able to enter and complete the running of 10 Iditarod Sled Dog Races over a period of 4 decades. Willow at that time was quite small. Taking advantage of no longer used trap line corridors and pure and simple lay of the land, for sled dog trails, I flagged and cut many, many miles of trail in addition to what was already existent which was not a lot. Today, the core of that trail network is the Haessler-Norris Trail System and is now extensively used by Iditarod entrants, snow-mobile enthusiasts, cross country skiers, and many other types of recreation, to list just a few.

Some years later, as our daughter was growing and she at a point where she would choose a vocation, we began looking for "Parks Highway frontage". There were two primary reasons; however, as will become evident, a third emerged. First though, our

daughter was thinking of becoming a veterinarian and with that we intended to build a corresponding facility for a practice and highway frontage would facilitate its success. Second, no matter what happened, highway frontage would serve as a future investment of which ultimately the value would be realized by our daughter in time as it was very apparent then as it is now, highway frontage is a valued entity of limited quantity in South central Alaska. Third, with professional career still intact, the ability to commute and be able to train sled dogs was also desired. Parks Highway frontage then became a priority. We perused countless soil maps along the Parks Highway and discovered several parcels fitting the bill but none with soils that had an inherent drainage structure, that being sand base below topsoil, such as what we found in Mile 72 to 74. Good drainage soil is of concern to any livestock owner and the fact that we had sled dogs made the decision to pursue necessary. ALSO, we wanted to be sure and locate such that the inherent noise of a kennel of sled dogs at feeding time and while hooking them up for training would not be a nuisance to any neighbors. Much to our liking in this vein of privacy thinking, we sought parcels more isolated by geographical or physical location. Our investigations again yielded parcels in the area of Mile 72-74. This was not by any means a magical area BUT provided close enough proximity for tolerable commuting distance. The area was further enhanced by adjacent large parcels that were not subdivided and had isolation to the east by the existence of the Alaska Railroad corridor. So, it was basically a no neighbor situation. What better place to have a kennel of sled dogs and still maintain an investment for the future. So it was, negotiated, and ultimately we purchased property in the Mile 73 area.

With continued interest of running the Iditarod Sled Dog Race, I needed to establish another trail network. Another musher lived across the highway and at the time the trail system was relatively limited and confined. By using USGS maps and copious amounts of physical exploration, several potential trail corridors were located; some utilizing old trap lines, some utilizing military trails left over from World War II, and the majority derived from simple lay of the land. It was an effort that took several years and the original trail network that I and others helped brush out or created through the years is now the core of the extensive Emil Stancec Trail network.

Since my efforts long ago to establish two trail systems, it is evident just how important these systems are to all recreational users but perhaps most important to those folks with designs of either running sled dogs geared for the Iditarod, Quest or several of many local shorter events. How evident has this impact been? Many, many people have relocated their homes and dog teams to these respective trail systems. From the Willow area, drivers enter Iditarod and Quest each year and frankly the vast majority of them are extremely competitive. Names such as; Dee Jonrowe, Rayme Smyth, Vern Halter, Linnwood Fiedler to mention a few while on the speed angle; Egil Ellis a multiple time champion, Bill Kornmuller a regularly top 10 speed placer, JP Norris and myself entering the World Championship Fur Rendezvous race in Anchorage, just to name a few in their respective events. This letter however is not about a whose who but at this point a piece of the puzzle which determines inherent value to a specific populous and the annual economic spin-off that has been going on for quite a few years now surrounding these two trail systems.

Not immune to the calamities of life I ventured briefly “outside” of Alaska a few years back. I explored several “very well known” dog mushing areas in Idaho, Montana and Wyoming looking for something to simulate the conditions of the Alaska home only with cheaper living expenses. What I found floored me. Food prices were cheaper but not so as expected, land prices in snow country were no different than Alaska and substantially more in the Rockies, same for acceptable rural homes, but “absolutely nowhere” could I duplicate or come remotely close to having the quality of trail system as the Emil Stancec Trail System. Returning to Alaska, I dissected the economic advantages and disadvantages of Tok, Fairbanks, Glennallen, Kenai Peninsula and still none of these were as competitive pricing wise in all areas and again, “nowhere” could I see a trail system that could compete with the Emil Stancec Trail System for everything that makes up a portion known as, quality of life.

So, I ended up reinvesting on some of my previously owned property, subsequently building a house knowing now the quality of life perceived greener elsewhere was pure mental flatulence.

When one tries to put a value on items that make up the quality of life how does one do this and define the very things that make up an inherent quality? The conundrum becomes even more so the older one gets, particularly if they are very active in the sled dog venue. One just doesn’t relocate and go cutting trails again when they get aged and to find such potential and still have realized investment while one is still alive, such as owning property along the Parks Highway, is likely non-existent.

I’ve brought you this far and you may ask what the point of all this is? Why does it seem so personal? Simple, the Willow Corridor for the Port Mackenzie rail extension requires a major portion of our property and will literally rumble the house as I watch trains go by through my living room window. It completely eliminates whatever land integrity and value we currently have, not to mention being displaced off a trail system I had been a primary conceiver and builder of and not to mention the investment in Parks Highway frontage property from a personal development standpoint. This is “OUR HOME, OUR LIFESTYLE, and OUR LIVELIHOOD”.

The inherent value of property depends on your desires for particular aspects in regards to the quality of life. For instance, a dog musher’s property where one can train from the doorstep is no different than a skier owning a condo at a ski resort, or a golfer living adjacent to a golf course, a lake dweller who has a penchant for water skiing, a snowmobile enthusiast who lives rural to avoid machine transport and the list can go on and on. Historically dog mushers are not viewed in this same light.

So, two questions come to mind. On a personal level, how does what is being promoted begin to compensate for what I’ve written about above AND do you really think we would have reinvested in this property had we known there were plans for a railroad to take over our property?

One might say, "Bob aren't you putting the cart before the horse? A decision hasn't yet been made as to the corridor route".

The general or rank and file public can comment but obviously cannot produce a shined up version, nor can they lobby like the Borough, Alaska Railroad, or special interest groups. The op-out then becomes the NEPA process. Challenging the Borough's mass media builder approach is at best a real David versus Goliath. I do understand these forums and the input received and it is "our" avenue to be heard. It is what goes on beyond that without us knowing what agencies and special interests are up to politically is what concerns me.

I am normally not such a cynic but am forced to be when government and special interest entities become organized to force people from land they supposedly own and have created a life on.

As a retired State of Alaska fishery biologist I personally object to the construction of this corridor. I know well what wetlands mean to surrounding salmon and trout streams. Too, as a sport fisher I know that Willow Creek supports a viable sport fishery on resident species of rainbow trout and Arctic Grayling. People from around the world fish this drainage, more times than not by guided rafting. In my current life, I am a sport fishing guide. In questioning other local guides, they found clients do not want to come to Willow Creek to see a railroad corridor while fishing. This is a major roadside salmon fishery BUT upstream from the confluence with the Susitna River this drainage at specific times can be a world class fishery for trout and grayling. To risk impairing the quality of this fishery and the annual revenue it creates is unconscionable.

I was the lead Fishery Biologist in setting forth a program from inception to fruition that supplied supplemental king salmon released as smolt to return the Willow Creek drainage as harvestable adults in an effort restore a depressed king salmon run at the time. The program coincided with the development of the Willow Creek State Recreational Site by State Parks Division. Currently, this supplemental king salmon release supports one of the most, if not the most popular east side Susitna River roadside fishery in upper Cook Inlet. Hundreds of people fish this annually. Farther upstream, two lodge facilities are nearly always jam packed with RVers, diners, guided fishing trips, and etc. during the summer salmon fishing season. "That" is their livelihood. With almost certainty, the projected number of coal trains would greatly impact the livelihood of these two private enterprises since the rail corridor would be just downstream. In addition, Willow Creek Recreation Area would be dissected by the corridor and as witnessed in other areas, chain link fences installed to prevent people from accessing areas on the other side of the tracks. There is no mitigation possible to come close to compensation to all the users of this area and if a train calamity were to occur in this area, what then? Therefore, I am not in favor of the corridor in this particular location in regards to impact on fishery resources.

Railroad corridors and moose do not get along and it is an undeniable fact during the winter moose gravitate towards railroad and highway corridors. Both the Willow Creek

area and the ridge line along Red Shirt are significant wintering grounds for moose. A “new” corridor in core calving and wintering grounds would mean disaster for moose numbers in the area. What’s the railroad going to do for mitigation, say there will be an allowable mortality or fence the whole corridor to prevent movement of wildlife from one side of the tracks to the other? There is a similar circumstance along the highway between Anchorage and Eagle River in the Ft. Richardson area. Therefore, I am not in favor of the corridor in this particular location in regards to impact on wildlife resources, especially in a more remote section of south central compared to the highway along Ft. Richardson.

Farther down, where the corridor travels just west of Red Shirt Lake, undoubtedly this would affect one of the “crown jewels” of State Parks. Steeped in history and usage as a day and multi-day canoe trail system traversing numerous lakes, South Rolly Lake campground would be located right on the periphery of the railroad right-of-way. South Rolly Lake campground is always full of family campers during the summer months and the trail from there along the ridge line to Red Shirt Lake is one of the most intensively used hiking trails in south central Alaska.

Anthropologically, Denaina Athabasca peoples historically used this trail and along the ridge overlooking Willow Creek roughly where the rail corridor would be there is evidence a Denaina village site was present, obviously taking advantage of summer salmon returns.

The number of people utilizing the Nancy Lake Recreation Area and the Willow Creek Recreation Area means a great deal to the local economy. A disruption such as the endeavor by the Borough and Alaska Railroad would most assuredly impact numerous small businesses in the Willow Area.

Traversing wetlands always brings up pros and cons where ever one travels. Wetlands serve to purify water by the time it soaks into the water table. Wetlands are a dynamic living entity, not a stagnant piece of marshy land having no value. All one has to do is look at the Palmer Hay flats and it becomes apparent that the east side of the highway is far more moist than the west. The highway has essentially prevented broad spectrum water perking and dispersal along its corridor. This is merely an observation, not a statement in disfavor of the highway. However, an ecological lesson should be drawn in consideration of what this corridor will do to all the adjacent wetlands on the way to Pt. Mackenzie. A potential mitigation provision of culverts and other such passage devices is not mitigation to the functional soundness of the surrounding lands. That serves more to appeal to a human mental justification designed to feel gooder. There is really no provision that can be made to provide for unfettered water movement along a marshy surface while perking into wetland soils. The net result of an all natural free flowing system is a recharged purified water table. I am therefore against the existence of a railroad corridor in this area.

I am very much aware of the requirement of the Surface Transportation Board

(STB) that construction of a new railroad line requires the Board's approval under 49 U.S.C. 10901. Also, I am aware of the requirement of an environmental review in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), 42 U.S.C. 4321-4335 and the Board's Section of Environmental Analysis (SEA) to ensure that the STB complies with NEPA over related environmental statutes.

Obviously I have aired my concerns from many aspects. Below are questions I've presented to both the Borough and Alaska Railroad in appropriate submittal forums. I only include these questions again, so you are aware of my concerns.

FYI, Questions previously asked of entities involved:

In relation to the alignment of the Willow corridor, due to the uniqueness of some property owners whose lives, home and livelihood are dependent on location, how will an independent evaluator appreciate these facets in determining value if they are not parlay to the situation themselves?

With the railroad corridor now on the table, no matter what the current status is, this process has effectively eliminated anyone of those directly affected families from selling their property. How do you propose to address this in instances such as; spouse has a change in job venue, a family emergency, or simply wanting to relocate?

Will property owners have a say in the determination of the value of their property?

Who determines what mitigation results are acceptable?

What happens if a rail corridor is determined and mitigation results are not acceptable?

Who determines where the rail corridor will go?

Who determines if there will be a rail corridor?

Will a specific corridor be selected for STB to consider or will a "shotgun" of potential corridors be presented to the STB to consider?

In Summary:

I obviously am very concerned over this whole matter. We, our family, is in essence dead in the water due to the proposed corridor going through Willow. It would, if chosen, destroy our way of life. Many times we've heard, "we will pay you fair market value for you to relocate". Not understood, despite the enormity of this State, is the perception of snow and trails everywhere. That is simply FALSE and combined with the fact this area lends itself to a much broader job market than anywhere else on the road system in the State. There is no conceivable way we could presently market our house and duplicate access to our livelihood and avocation if we were forced to move.

Port Mackenzie is a very close parallel to the "Bridges to Nowhere". Is not this project designed to support the Port at Point Mackenzie, a port established with no initial infrastructure of dependable use? The port continues to gobble away dollars when other areas of existing State infrastructure could certainly benefit by the projected dollars estimated for this project. The existing system already works. The Borough and ARR are putting the cart before the horse and flip-flopping as necessary to meet their special interest gain.

Thank you for taking the time to read my concerns.

Most Sincerely,



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